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ABSTRACT

Adults experience cyclical periods of stability and transition throughout life. The conflict between role cycles may spur career change. Personality differences between voluntary changers and nonchangers have been identified in research. Career changes may be triggered by factors ranging from the anticipated (marriage, empty nest) to the unanticipated (illness, divorce, layoff) to "nonevents" (e.g., a marriage or promotion that did not occur). Other factors are longer life expectancy, changing views of retirement, and economic necessity. New models of career development that better explain adults' developmental diversity include Leach and Chakiris' three types of careers (linear, free form, and mixed form) and Cross' three types of "life plans" (linear life plan; redistribution of work, education, and leisure into recurring cycles; and blended life plan). These new ways of looking at life/career cycles and the transition process suggest approaches for assisting adults contemplating career change. A multifaceted approach requires recognizing the developmental stages of adults' multiple life roles and their interaction. Another model suggests that counselors can help adults in transition assess four factors: self, situation, support, and strategies. A variety of coping skills are helpful for managing transition. A holistic approach to transition management includes obtaining counseling, assessment, and career information. A computerized career guidance system such as the System of Interactive Guidance and Information can be of value. (11 references) (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

DIGEST NO. 115

Adults in Career Transition

by Sandra Kerka

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Job and career changes are increasingly common due to the uncertainties of the economic environment, technological changes, and new attitudes toward work. The more drastic of these transitions--changing careers--is often linked to the developmental stage of midlife. However, such changes are not limited to that age group. In fact, recent research and theory are moving away from age-related developmental models toward more individually determined stages. Other researchers are questioning the validity of linear career development models versus cyclical patterns. Still others criticize prevailing models for their lack of relevance to women and different cultural groups. This **ERIC Digest** reviews current thinking about what motivates adults to change careers and the concepts of life/career cycles. Implications of the new models for helping adults in transition are described.

Who Changes Careers and Why?

Although "midlife crisis" is a dominant image, adults experience cyclical periods of stability and transition throughout life. Sargent and Schlossberg (1988) suggest that adult behavior is determined by transitions, not age. Adults are motivated to make transitions by a continual need to belong, control, master, renew, and take stock.

One explanation for transition may be found in Hughes and Graham's (1990) work in developing the Adult Life Roles Instrument. These researchers identified six life roles (relationships with self, work, friends, community, partner, and family) that go through cycles of initiation, adaptation, reassessment, and reconciliation. An individual may be at a different stage in each role simultaneously. The conflict or lack of congruence between two or more of these role cycles may spur the process of career change.

Interviews with over 500 adults (Kanchier and Unruh 1988) uncovered differences between voluntary changers ("Questers") and nonchangers ("Traditionalists"). Questers viewed jobs or careers as vehicles for self-expression and growth; they experienced cycles of entry, mastery, and disengagement. In the disengagement stage, when self-appraisal tells them the intrinsic rewards of a job no longer satisfy, Questers seek change. In contrast, Traditionalists value extrinsic rewards (position, power, money, security) that control their career choices. They are generally less introspective and open to risk than Questers.

Career change has become more socially acceptable as personal fulfillment is more highly valued. Career decision making is seen as a series of continuous choices across the life span, not a once-and-for-all event. Thus, careers may be viewed as a spiral sequence of all life roles, with changes triggered by factors ranging from the anticipated (marriage, empty nest) to unanticipated (illness, divorce, layoff) to "nonevents" (a marriage or promotion that did not occur) (Leibowitz and Lea 1985). Other reasons that people seek change are that their initial career was not their own choice, their original aspirations were not met, there is insufficient time for other life roles, or the present career is incongruent with changed values or interests. Longer life expectancy, changing views of retirement, and economic necessity are other factors.

Personal reactions to transition vary. Whether the career change is voluntary or involuntary, people may experience a variety of emotions such as fear, anxiety, or a sense of loss. Phases of transition may include immobilization, denial, self-doubt, letting go, testing options, searching for meaning, and integration and renewal (Leibowitz and Lea 1985). The close relationship between career and identify may necessitate reformulating one's self-concept when making a career change.

New Models of Career Development

The traditional linear career development model--education-employment-retirement--very likely accounts "for less than one-third of all careers" (Leach and Chakiris 1988, p. 52). New ways of looking at life/career cycles that better explain adults' developmental diversity are needed. Leach and Chakiris elaborate on three types of careers: linear, free form, and mixed form. Linear careers follow the traditional pattern of education-work-retirement. Free-form careers include work for pay (such as permanent or temporary part-time jobs, consulting, entrepreurial activity) or unpaid work. Mixed-form careerists are involved in transitions between linear and free-form patterns. The temporarily or permanently unemployed, underemployed, and those undergoing training or retraining in preparation for a career fall into this category.

In her work with adults as learners, Cross identified three types of "life plans" (*Perspectives on Adult Education* 1988):

- Linear life plan--education when young, work through the middle years, leisure when elderly
- Redistribution of work, education, and leisure into recurring cycles
- Blended life plan--combining leisure, work, and study activities concurrently throughout life

She sees the trend toward longer, healthier life spans resulting in greater emphasis on the blended life plan.

Given these diverse career and life forms, the developmental tasks for each adult differ with age, social role, and culture. Age-related life-cycle theories have been criticized by Eastmond (1991), Hughes and Smith (1985), and others because they are often inappropriate for women and minorities.

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Women may accomplish the same developmental tasks as men, but often in different periods of the life-cycle. Forrest and Mikolaitis (1986) argue for the inclusion of a different component in women's career development--self in relation to others--that accounts for women's experience of the world. Ethnic minorities' career development is influenced by their differential experience of home, school, and the workplace; the kinds of transitions they undergo may not correspond to linear or age-related patterns (Hughes and Smith 1985).

Helping Adults in Career Transition

These new ways of looking at life/career cycles and the transition process suggest approaches for assisting adults contemplating career change. The multifaceted approach proposed by Hughes and Graham (1990) requires recognizing the developmental stages of adults' multiple life roles and their interaction. The search for a new career involves not only matching the person to the work, but also fitting the "occupational career" into the "life career" (Leibowitz and Lea 1985).

According to Sargent and Schlossberg (1988), adult readiness for change depends on four factors: self, situation, support, and strategies. Counselors can help adults in transition assess (1) self--personal responses to change; (2) situation--changes in roles, relationships, routines, assumptions; (3) support--does a range of sources exist? were they disrupted by transition?; and (4) strategies--taking action to change the situation, change its meaning, or change oneself.

A variety of coping skills for managing transition are necessary (Leibowitz and Lea 1985). These skills include--

--perceiving and responding to transitions
--developing and using internal and external support systems
--reducing emotional and physiological distress
--planning and implementing change

A holistic approach to transition management includes the following components:

- receiving psychological, marital, and family counseling
- assessing interests, values, and skills (using gender- and culturally appropriate instruments
- obtaining information about careers
- learning about educational and training opportunities
- identifying and overcoming resource barriers such as financial need and child care

A computerized career guidance system such as SIGI PLUS (System of Interactive Guidance and Information) can also be of value. Norris, Shatkin, and Katz (1991) describe how SIGI was modified in recognition of the fact that career decision making is lifelong and, for adults, more complex. Components of SIGI PLUS encompass both occupational and nonoccupational factors, because such factors as family mobility and investment in education, training, and social/community activities may inhibit adults' flexibility in career choice. The Coping component recognizes the practical problems and barriers to training and career entry facing adults.

If, as Leach and Chakiris (1988) suggest, periodic unemployment will be experienced by most of the working population at some time in their lives, career and life role transitions will be everyone's concern. They suggest helping people make distinctions between jobs, work, and careers; place greater value on noneconomic work roles; and recognize transitions as an inevitable part of life and a continual challenge for redefining oneself.

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